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Challenges for Gender Studies amidst the Surge in Anti-Gender Movements

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Who do you think the most well-known and widely translated German gender sociologist in East-Central Europe is? Before you start guessing, the answer is Gabrielle Kuby, who labels gender studies, together with gender mainstreaming and LGBTQI rights, a “culture of death.” Kuby gives book talks throughout Central Europe and was recently appointed as a “well-known German sociologist” at one of the newly founded state universities in Sümeg, Hungary. More importantly, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán listed Kuby’s *The Global Sexual Revolution* (Angelico Press, 2015) as an important book in his collection, and even referred to it in an interview about the future of illiberal Europe with the online magazine Politico in November 2015. The book has been translated into six languages besides Hungarian: Polish, Slovak, Romanian, Croatian, Czech and English. Kuby, who is the author of twelve books and an outsider to German sociology--both as an academic discipline and profession--promises to have a substantial impact on the discipline’s future development. She has a wider reach than most of her colleagues because Catholic websites make her books free for download in local languages, including Hungarian. Moreover, her views are mainstreamed into religious educational institutions, which are increasing in number by the day as the state withdraws public spending on education. Unfortunately, Kuby is representative of a global movement of scholars, which refers to gender studies as a “culture of death.” Casting feminists as oppressors of men, she is also a part of the anti-gender movement, which organizes demonstrations and successful referenda against universal human rights and gay marriage in places such as Slovenia.

Several new challenges to gender studies and to the scholars in Europe who work on gender are illustrated in this introductory story. The movements attacking gender studies as an academic discipline are gaining much public and state support in a changing Europe. In Poland, for example, any project or educational program that mentions the term “gender” is ineligible for state funding. The argument that women activists oppress men first arose during the suffrage movement in the early twentieth century. Current anti-gender movements in East-Central Europe not only piggyback on this argument, but also offer something different, as indicated above.

Gender studies developed as a critical, interdisciplinary field with a relatively late institutionalization. In an increasingly shrinking academic job market, due to continuous cuts in the social sciences and humanities, gender studies has been an easy target. Recently the main battleground for “anti-gender movements” has been objective science as we know it from the Enlightenment. As the Slovenian sociologist Roman Kuhar convincingly argued in his analysis of these developments in Slovenia and Croatia, the use by “anti-gender movements” of “scientific” evidence against “gender ideology” means a paradigm change in science. According to this line of reasoning, scientific data can now be contested on the basis of normative moral positions. The ad hoc selection of scientific data to prove an ideologically important point becomes a common practice. This means that anybody can now present himself or herself as an expert as Gabriele Kuby does. This is especially the case if shady state foundations are supporting higher educational institutions, such as the Pallas Athena Foundations in Hungary.

Thus, gender studies and the knowledge it produces about society and culture are now being re-evaluated. The institutional and academic vulnerability of gender studies is increasing because of the re-evaluation of its position in the field of science as such. What kind of strategies are possible in this new academic climate?

So far, only partial success has been achieved by means of the "naming and shaming" strategies, which some gender studies scholars employ to highlight what is considered scientific by whom. When elites claim that those in the anti-gender movement "do not know what gender really is," their ridicule opens up a space for contestation, gives the anti-gender movement more visibility, and offers points of identification for it to attract new followers. Moreover, in some cases these efforts have only deepened political cleavages, without yielding any real understanding of the depth of the threat to the infrastructure of human rights (including institutionalized gender studies). Most seriously, some efforts fail to offer new methods or rhetoric in support of progressive politics, as regards both past achievements and goals for the future. It is politically imperative to recognize that anti-gender studies mobilization is a hegemonic fight, in the Gramscian sense, for control. Institutionalized gender studies, which developed according to the liberal paradigm, has in some cases kept a critical distance. However, the emergence of illiberal democracies and the closing of societies offer a possible alternative to liberal democracies. Therefore, attacks on gender studies as a discipline and as a knowledge-producing institution are equivalent to attacks on liberal democracy. This is a fight that gender studies scholars cannot afford to lose, because it means losing the very concept of equality as we know it.